RANI-KI-VAV, PATAN

Archaeological Survey of India

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RANI-KI-VAV, PATAN

Kirit Mankodi

प्रत्नकीर्तिमपावृणु

Published by the Director General
Archaeological Survey of India
Janpath, New Delhi-110011
2012

Published on the occasion of the celebrations of 150 years of the Archaeological Survey of India

First edition : 2012

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2012
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Price : Rs. 30.00

PRINTED AT Batra Art Press, A-41, Naraina Industrial Area, Ph-II, Delhi-110030
Ph. : +91-011-41417701, 02, 03

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RANI-KI-VAV, PATAN

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

RANI-KI-VAV (23° 51' N; 72° 11' E) LIES 2 KM TO THE north-west of the historic town of Patan, a recently created District headquarters of Gujarat and is situated 140 km north-west of Ahmedabad (Map). Patan is on the side of the River Sarasvati, and was earlier known by its mediaeval name of Anahillapura, Anahillavada, Anahilapataka, Analavata or Naharwalah. It was a flourishing city and capital of the Solanki or Chaulukya dynasty of Gujarat. The city is also famous for the Sahasralinga talav ("reservoir adorned with one thousand *lingas* of Shiva") excavated during the Solanki period and for its traditional *Patola* textile. There are many ancient monuments and structural remains still extant in Patan which include fortifications with gates and bastions, temples, tombs, mosques, tanks, step-wells, etc.

Amongst the step-wells, it is the Rani-ki-Vav which is the most magnificent step-well not only in Gujarat but in the whole country. Adorned with exquisitely carved sculptures arranged in panelled niches, it is actually a temple-well. It is believed to have been constructed by Queen Udayamati, the consort of Bhimadeva I of Solanki dynasty, most likely in the late eleventh century. Rani-ki-Vav is sited beside the ancient fortification wall, ridges of which

can still be seen running close to embankments of the Sahasralinga Talav, earlier known as 'Durlabh Sarovar' that was later repaired and renovated under the command of the most illustrious Solanki king, Siddharaja Jayasimha.

Rani-ki-Vav opens daily for the visitors from sun-rise to sun-set. There are rules, available with local offices, for shooting/ filming and taking photographs of the monument. The photographs are also available for sale at the office of Director General of Archaeological Survey of India, Janpath, New Delhi-110011 and Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India, Vadodara Circle, Vadodara (Gujarat). Currently entry fee for the site is Rs. 5/- for Indians and Rs. 100/- for foreigners, respectively. No entry fee is charged from children below 15 years.

2. STEPPED-WELL AS AN ARCHITECTURAL FORM

THE WHOLE OF THE WESTERN INDIA HAS SCANTY rainfall and generally sandy soil; therefore, the water level sinks far below the ground in the dry season, requiring wells to be dug to a great depth. The stepped-well is a well which is provided with an underground flight of steps leading down to the level of the water. The earliest step-wells were small and plain, but gradually the step-well evolved as an underground architectural form, with a well at the end of a long flight of steps marked by pillared pavilions of multiple storeys. Step-wells were usually excavated close to the rivers. Since the creation of reservoirs, lakes, wells and other watering places was considered as a meritorious act in India, especially to commemorate the dead, innumerable stepped-wells were excavated in Gujarat and Rajasthan in the course of centuries. In the barren landscape of Western India, these subterranean structures with their ornate interiors make a startling impact on the visitor who chances upon them. The stepped-well is truly India's unique contribution to the architectural wealth of the world.

Rani-ki-Vav, "the Queen's Step-Well" (Pl. 1), was built in the last decades of the eleventh century by Queen Udayamati as a memorial to her husband Bhimadeva I of the Chaulukya or Solanki

dynasty. Measuring more than sixty-five metres in length, it is among the largest in Gujarat, and in terms of its sculptures which number several hundred, surpasses all other examples. At some time in the past, the lower parts of the monument were silted up, the uppermost parts alone were visible, but they were in ruins; the pillars, beams and other fallen parts were carried away in the nineteenth century to be used in building another step-well nearby, known as Barot Vav. Then only the two extremities of Rani-ki-Vav, the free standing pair of columns at the eastern end and the raised wall of the well in the west, which were on higher ground than the step-well itself, remained visible (Pl.2). In the last few decades the Archaeological Survey of India has conserved Rani-ki-Vav after removing all the sand that had choked it up.

Rani-ki-Vav faces the east, and possesses all the components of a developed stepped-well. At ground level a free standing structure on two columns with an elaborate superstructure known as a *torana* was built as a kind of ceremonial entrance. Beyond the *torana* commences a stepped-corridor (that leads all the way down to the well at the far end); this stepped-corridor is marked at intervals by landings where multi-storeyed pavilions were built; at the end of the corridor there is a reservoir, beyond which is the well. The reservoir collects the surplus water from the well. The length of the monument, measured at ground level from the *torana* to the far side of the well, is sixty-five metres, or two hundred and thirteen feet. The four pavilions which demarcate the stages along the descent had two, four, six and seven storeys respectively, the roof of the uppermost storey of each pavilion reaching up to the ground level; the depth of the well was twenty-nine metres or one hundred feet.

Udayamati's step-well is imposing not only in terms of size, but also for the profusion and quality of its decoration. Sculpture enhances the walls, the pillared pavilions, and the inner side of the well itself. Large images alone, even in its present ruined state, number nearly four hundred; had all the seven levels been fully furnished with all their planned sculptures, the total number would have been at least eight hundred.

Out of the original seven terraces built on the corridor walls, a maximum of five terraces are preserved now. Shorn of the upper parts of the walls and the pavilions, the stepped well now looks like a hollow pit, when approaching from the east or front side. However, had it come down to us completed and unimpaired—with its stately *torana* intact, with the full complement of all seven terraces on the walls, with the landing pavilions with their increasing number of storeys all reaching up to the top, with the well-wrought pillars rising on the same plumb line, and with the closely spaced sculptures in their niches—then surely Udayamati's step-well would have presented to our eyes the vibrant form intended by its builders (Pls. 3-4).

The monument has suffered greatly in terms of sculpture. The niches in the top terraces wherever intact are mostly devoid of their images, but many of these were probably not installed; some of these, which must have been intended for the niches, or were dislodged from their places, have been recovered in the course of de-silting work by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Commissioned in the late eleventh century by no less a person than a dowager queen, mother of a monarch whose territorial possessions and wealth were continuously increasing,

the Rani-ki-Vav was the most ambitiously conceived step-well of its time, and its design and execution must have called forth all the experience and resourcefulness at the disposal of its builders.

It should be noted that in the first phase of construction involving the digging of the trenches and the shoring up of the individual terraces, the builders would have proceeded from the top towards the bottom, each terrace being shored up before excavating the next one below; but in the second phase, that of preparing the walls and the pavilions, a reverse course would have been followed, the lower terrace of the walls and storey of the pavilions being completed first, then followed by work on the one resting above.

The Stepped-Corridor

The main steps originally started at the *torana* at ground level, leading a visitor all the way down to the tank and the well on the main east/west axis. But the monument was planned in such an intelligent way that someone approaching from the rear did not have to walk the full length to the front of the structure, because other supplementary staircases placed at the western end of the monument, gave direct access from the higher to the lower levels of the monument without having the visitor to walk all around it.

The central zone on each terrace, with sunken niches alternating with projecting panels is the principal repository of sculptures. The niches on the walls of corridors, as also in the pavilions, are occupied by figures of divinities, while the projecting pillared panels portray *apsaras* and other figures. Two hundred

and ninetytwo pillars supported the pavilions of the step-well; today 226 remain, either intact or fragmentary.

The depth of the step-well gradually increases as one descends to the tank and the well, the draw-well having the greatest depth from the ground above, and together with the tank in front, possesses the maximum number of seven levels.

One can form a true estimate of the grandeur of the monument, both architecture and sculptures, only when one enters the third stage of the corridor, also the largest, and of which as many as four of the six original terraces are preserved, though many of the sculptures are missing. As one views the courtyard from the landing just before, one is struck by the beautiful geometrical and decorative patterns carved on the walls, both left and right, patterns that are woven even today in the traditional Patola textile for which Patan is famous for centuries (Pl. 5). The reservoir or *kunda* attached to the well to collect surplus water was planned on an ambitious scale. It is of a rectangular shape, about seven metres square. Such reservoirs were often built in front of step-wells, but no other tank is of comparable size or so elaborately treated.

But even while construction was in progress, the builders felt the need to strengthen the surrounding high walls, and a bracing structure was added as an after thought. This bracing structure built in the bed of the tank consists of a frame of pillars and beams to buttress the walls on both at the north and south . The surest proof that this structure was not part of the original design of the tank is the fact that it makes a full viewing of the tank, impossible and also obscures the central niches in the walls. Thus, on the one

hand, though an imposing setting was designed for the tank, yet it is impossible actually to view it in its entirety from anywhere. On the other, though niches were provided on the lower terrace of the walls, these niches are totally obscured by this structure. We may not be wrong if we conclude that it was as a result of this intrusion that the builders altogether abandoned the plan to install images in all the niches in the lowest storey.

The fourth pavilion, fronting the well, is the final member of the rectangular pit which comprises the long corridor, the pavilions and the tank—all of which are adjuncts of the well. The floor of the corridor is at its deepest in the tank or reservoir; hence this adjoining pavilion at the rear end of the monument, where seven storeys were planned, had the greatest height of all the pavilions. As water in the well rose, it would overflow through the lowest storey of the pavilion into the tank.

The Well

The well, situated at the western end of the whole excavation, is imposing alike for its depth, which is nearly twenty-nine metres or one hundred feet, and for its diameter, which at the top is as much as ten metres; it was fed by the Sarasvati; water used to remain in the well even till as late as 1988 though now it is dry.

The well shaft is divided into seven horizontal levels, three of which follow the terraced profile of the rest of the structure, with diminishing diameter as the depth increased (Pl. 6).

In the subliminal zone, below the terraced wall, the cylindrical shaft is paved with plain dressed slabs, to a height of

about six metres. At the top, eight pairs of large corbelled brackets were built into the rear of the well in two registers to facilitate the drawing up of water.

3. THE SCULPTURES

AT THE RANI-KI-VAV IN PATAN, BOTH WALLS OF the corridor, and the well itself, besides the pavilions, were fully covered with large sculptures which must have numbered about eight hundred, and with many other carvings of a symbolic or decorative character. Each terrace on the corridor was organized into three horizontal zones: a broad median band, reserved for principal sculptures; the basal beam for the hundreds of smaller figures; and the coping course which bore the pediments crowning the images in the central zone. The large sculptures were either in the form of steles placed in niches or on projecting panels which alternate with the niches. Inside the pavilions, the walls were adorned with large projecting niches.

1. Two-fold Division of Sculptures: Major statuary, reserved always for the median band on each terrace on the wall, in the large niches in the pavilions and in the well, resolves itself into two classes of about equal numbers, one comprising images of deities in niches, and the other consisting of figures, such as *apsaras* and the regents of the directions (*dikpala*), carved on the upright posts which alternate with the niches.

2. Vishnu's twenty-four forms: Since an early date, Vishnu came to be conceived of as one having four forms—or, rather three separate deities associated with the ancient conception of

Bhagavat-Vishnu. They were merged with together to make up the quartet of Vasudeva, Sankarsana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. At a still later date, twenty-four emanations of Vishnu were imagined, and twenty-four of his more important names, out of the 1,000 preserved since the time of the *Mahabharata*, were given to these forms. In art, the twenty-four forms are usually represented standing frontally, and are identical in all respects except for the positions in his four hands of his standard attributes, the conch, the discus, the mace and the lotus.

On the walls around the reservoir area there are twenty-five sculptures of Vishnu in niches, and others are found on corner panels in other stages of the corridor, but the whole set of twenty-four is not represented, only fifteen being depicted, a few were more than once.

3. Parvati's Penance: Now many as fifteen images of Devis, who may be regarded as members of the group of twelve Gauris (Dvadashagauri), who are at the centre of a cult exclusive to women, are present; in the finished state of the monument many more may have been there. The names of the twelve Gauris are Uma, Parvati, Gauri, Lalita, Shriya, Krishna, Maheshvari, Rambha, Savitri, Trishanda, Totala and Tripura. While Gauri is the name of one of the goddesses, the group of twelve is also collectively designated as Twelve Gauris. Their blessings are invoked for women's marital fulfilment. Amongst the twelve, Parvati (who is also variously named Uma or Gauri, the names being interchangeable) was often represented as performing "the austerities of the five fires", a harsh penance to obtain one's wish by divine intervention, by standing in the midst of four fire altars, and gazing up at the sun as the fifth fire in the sky.

It is the same theme of Parvati's fiery penance that is featured most often in the fifteen representations in our step well. The myth is well known. Parvati in her earlier birth was known as Sati, daughter of Daksha Prajapati; because she married Siva, who wandered naked in cemeteries, kept the company of snakes and wild animals, she was disowned by her father. Once Daksha performed a great sacrifice, which Sati also attended uninvited; insulted by her father, she threw herself into the sacrificial flames. She was reborn as a daughter of the king of snowy mountains, Himalaya, performed the austerities of five fires and again was united with Siva. The image of Parvati performing her penance came to symbolize a wife's steadfast devotion to her husband, and her desire to be reunited with him in all her future incarnations.

4. The Eight Vasus: At various spots in the step-well are to be found the representations of the Vasus, eight heavenly personages who are named in ancient tradition as Dhara, Dhruva, Soma, Apa, Anala, Anila, Pratyusha and Prabhasa.

The myth of the Vasus is well known: A king in the epic *Mahabharata* falls in love with a beautiful girl, who agrees to marry him on the stipulation that no matter what she does she should never be questioned by him.

Seven sons are born to the couple one after another. The mother consigns every one of them into the river Ganga (Ganges). When the eighth newborn son is about to be drowned, the anguished father prevents it. His wife reveals that there was a divine purpose behind all her actions: her sons were no ordinary boys but the eight Vasus, who were cursed to lose their status and be born on earth for stealing the sacred cow of a sage. They could only be released by the Ganga. She herself was the Ganga

personified; with the union of the hero and the sacred river, the time for the Vasus' return to the heaven had come—the mother was actually liberating the Vasus from the curse of mortality, and to regain their lost divinity. Ganga's promise being broken, she herself also leaves the king and returns to the heaven. The eighth Vasu, who did not recover his celestial station, lived on earth as the great hero Bhishma.

The Vasus, as reminders of the myth of liberation of the soul of the dead, occur at many spots in the Rani-ki-Vav, but their most telling representation is in the deepest level in the well, at the edge of the water , where they are portrayed, folding their hands to the water below, which surely was intended to symbolize the Ganga herself: we remember that the Rani-ki-Vav step-well is Udayamati's memorial to her departed husband Bhimadeva.

5. Images in the niches: Unlike temples, where sculptures are arranged around the walls and mainly on the same level, the Ran-ki-Vav's walls have, or had, as many as seven terraces one above the other all around the monument. The surviving niches to accommodate divine images alone, not to mention the *apsaras* and other figures on the pillared panels that alternate with these niches, number over three hundred and sixty-five. It is impossible to consider them all in a short guide. Hence, only selected sculptures will be included here. Emphasis will be laid on the sculptures in the third stage of the corridor where visitors can observe all the sculptures closely.

For the convenience of the reader, images will be described in the following manner: each stage of the corridor will be taken up one by one, and within that stage images in the lowest terrace will be described clockwise from the left to right. The niches will

be numbered serially, from 1 to 365, but the reader should not be surprised to find many numbers blank (see Chart in Pl. 7).

The reader is advised to refer to the handy "Chart Showing the positions of the sculptures" in Pl. 7, to locate the sculptures being described in the sequel. It must be remembered also that all terraces are not approachable to visitors at present. Those who wish to get more detailed information are referred to the "Further Reading" at the end of this book.

Unless otherwise stated, the attributes in the hands are described clockwise from the image's natural right hand, ending with the natural left. Some Sanskrit terms had to be used in the text; readers not familiar with them will find them explained in the Glossary at the end.

6. Images in the niches of the Corridor: The first two stages of the stepped-corridor, immediately after the *torana* are greatly damaged and little sculpture is preserved in *Niches 1 to 18.* It is only when one descends further that the sculptural wealth of the step-well becomes clear.

Here, in the lowest terrace in this third stage of the stepped corridor, one is face-to-face, or eye-to-eye, so to say, with the gods and goddesses, *apsaras* and others. Seven of Vishnu's ten incarnations are featured: Varaha, Vamana, Rama, Balarama, Parashurama, the Buddha and Kalki. Narasimha also must have been there but is now missing. Independent sculptures of the Matsya (fish) and Kurma (tortoise) incarnations were rare in Gujarat in this period anyway; hence their absence here is hardly surprising.

The eight incarnations were equally divided between the two walls and, since there are altogether fourteen niches on the two walls facing south and north, other deities were installed in the three remaining niches on either wall; thus, there are Durga killing the buffalo demon, the Sun god, Vishnu and Bhairava. Starting from the left, the first niched sculpture is Balarama (see Pl.7, Chart.)

Niche 19, Balarama (Pl. 8): The god is standing with a slight bend in his body, placing his weight on his left foot. In his four hands he bears a plough, a lotus, a pestle and a citron; Shesha, his snake patron, spreads his triple jewelled hoods overhead.

This is one of the few independent representations of Balarama known from Gujarat, and it exemplifies some of the traits that contributed to the make-up of the deity. At the same time that Balarama is an incarnation of Vishnu, he is also a partial manifestation of Shesha or Ananta, the mythical snake, hence the snake hoods are carved over the head. The bucolic-agrarian trait of the god is expressed by the plough and the pestle in his hands.

But one singular attribute of the god's personality found in Balarama's representations elsewhere is not represented here. A jar of wine was often featured in Balarama's hand since ancient times; but here it is replaced by the innocuous citron fruit: surely the explanation for this must be that this particular trait of Balarama was abhorrent to the people of Gujarat, known for their sobriety, and therefore his intemperance was deliberately suppressed.

Niche 20, Parashurama: The god is standing with a single bend in his body, carrying in his four hands a battle-axe, an arrow, a bow and either a coconut or a citron fruit.

Niche 21, Buddha (Pl.9): This singular sculpture has a slender form, as befits an ascetic. The Buddha is represented as standing with his body gently bent. He wears a short loin cloth and a rather short upper garment; a coarse cotton sash is slung across his chest; around his neck is a string of beads, and a long garland reaches down to his ankles. His head is covered with ringlets of hair, and a slight protuberance on his head signifies his superhuman character; his earlobes are so long that they almost touch his shoulders, a mark of greatness, and he wears small ear pendants. His coarse garments bring out Buddha's ascetic aspect vividly. His hands hold the *varadakshamala*, a second rosary of large beads, a lotus and the end of his robe.

Niche 22, Kalki ((Pl.10): The incarnation that Vishnu will in future assume to destroy the evil forces is represented here as a warrior, and as a sovereign king: in the former role he is riding on horseback, wielding a sword, armed with a dagger tied at his waist, clad in high protective boots, and sparse ornaments, and trampling his adversaries; and as a sovereign king he is wearing a tall crown, shielded by a parasol and fanned by a maid. He has four hands, three of which display weapons, a sword, a mace and a discus; but his left front hand is intriguing, for in this hand Kalki holds a bowl into which a woman pours from a pitcher. The horse is caparisoned, and his reins rest over the wrist of Kalki's left hand.

Niche 23, Durga Mahishasuramardini killing the buffalo demon (Pl.11): Durga's violent form strikes an aggressive pose, planting her left leg on the ground. She wields in her ten right hands a trident, a thunderbolt, an arrow, a mace, a goad, a spear (or javelin), a discus, a lotus, a kettle-drum and a sword; and in the left hands a shield, a bell, a skull-cup with a fish, a three-headed cobra, a war horn, a bow, a noose, the demon's hair and the shaft of the trident. The buffalo buckles under her weight, his tongue hanging out, and his human form, wielding sword and shield, emerges to continue the duel. Durga's lion attacks from the rear.

Niche 27, Bhairava (Pl.12): This niche houses a twenty-armed dancing Bhairava. His eight discernible right hands display: a dagger, the gesture of striking or slapping, a thunderbolt, a baton, a kettle-drum, a sword, a cobra, some small object between the thumb and forefinger. The ten left hands have: an object at the tips of the index and middle fingers, the tail of the cobra, the gesture of striking, a shield, the threatening gesture, an indistinct object, a noose, a goad, a skull-bowl with a fish and a human head. His wild dog mauls a decapitated corpse, and reaches up to lick the blood oozing from the freshly cut head in Bhairava's hand.

Niche 29, Varaha (Pl.13): The god with a human body and a wild boar's head strikes a hero's posture filling up the frame diagonally, as he lifts up the Earth goddess from the bed of the ocean. Varaha's natural right hand rests beside his body, his rear right hand holds a mace, his upper left hand supports a discus in the palm and the natural left hand holds a conch. The contrast between the virile Varaha and the sensuous goddess caressing his snout is worth noting.

Niche 31, Vamana (Pl.14): Vamana is a plump boy, a celibate student, clad only in a loin cloth and with a scarf thrown over his shoulder, and adorned with a few simple ornaments, which include large earrings. He has only two hands, his right hand holding the *varadakshamala*, and the left hand an umbrella. His close-cropped hair is tightly curled; his chest displays the *shrivatsa* mark, revealing that the chubby boy is none other than Vishnu.

Niche 32, Rama (Pl.15): This is an unusual four-armed image of Rama, holding in his four hands an arrow, a sword, a shield and a slack bow. Four-armed sculptures of Rama are rare in art, and none is known with the attributes of our sculpture. The surviving sculptures in the terrace above this one are goddesses, three of Gauri or Parvati and one of Chamunda. There were more, but their niches are vacant.

Niche 40, Parvati as one of the Twelve Gauris: This is the first of the fifteen surviving sculptures of the goddess to be seen in the monument. Standing, she has four arms, with *varadakshamala*, a ladle, a bunch of sacred grass, and a pitcher.

Niche 41, Chamunda: Chamunda has an emaciated figure, and a scorpion is crawling on her abdomen. She wears an animal skin as loin cloth similar to Bhairavá in Niche 27, above, and her hair is gathered up in a *jata*. Human bones serve as her adornments. Chamunda's ten arms have the gesture of blessing, a trident, a dagger, a kettle-drum and a serpent's tail; the serpent's head, a bell, that *mudra* in which the tongue actually licks the little finger and *khatvanga*. A nude man is prostrate under Chamunda's feet, and one of her goblin entourage gnaws at his fingers.

Niche 43, Gauri: Gauri is standing frontally in meditation, her body straight as a rod. The two upper hands have a lotus and a bunch of sacred grass. Her hair is matted like an ascetic's, but otherwise her person is well-adorned.

Niche 44, Gauri or Parvati: The goddess is standing erect in penance, her hair matted like an ascetic's. Her four hands display the gesture of blessing, a rosary of large beads, sacred grass and a pitcher.

The terraces above are greatly bereft of divine images; and where the images are present they are badly weathered. We, therefore, proceed to the walls on either side of the reservoir (*kunda*) between the third pavilion and the circular well. Vishnu's images, among which are some of his twenty-four forms (*Chaturvimshatimurtis*) and the twelve forms of Gauri (*Dvadashagauris*) predominate the terraces around the sacred *kunda* or tank.

Niche 107, Parvati, one of the Twelve Gauris: The goddess has four arms, with *varadakshamala*, a Siva-*linga* and an image of Ganesha within long-stalked lotuses, and a pitcher.

Niche 108, Parvati, as a Gauri: Parvati in this niche is very similar to the preceding, except that her natural right hand in the blessing gesture does not carry a rosary, and that her mount is absent. Also in place of the cotton strand, here a rosary twists upon itself between her breasts.

Niches 109 to 129: These are occupied by Vishnu's twenty-four theological forms, where the images are identical but the four attributes in the hands of the god, conch shell, discus, mace and lotus, are rotated.

Niche 130, Parvati (Pl.16): This is a striking image of Parvati performing austerities standing on one leg; her asceticism is emphasized by the loin cloth, a sacred thread, a necklace of beads, and the large orifices in the earlobes which are devoid of ornaments. Parvati's hair is gathered up on the top of her head. Four fire altars surround her. Her natural right hand is in the blessing gesture, the other hands are holding, respectively, a rosary of large beads which she is counting between her fingers, sacred grass, and a pitcher. Young girls wait upon her with the usual objects of worship, including an incense burner. The eight side niches contain goddesses, and Parvati's iguana mount is under the pedestal. The arch over Parvati's head has representations of the nine personified planets (the *Navagrahas*), but only a few can be discerned; *Surya*, seated, wearing a tall crown and holding lotuses; *Shukra* (preceptor of the demons), is bearded; *Rahu,* offering oblations; and *Ketu*, with a snake's hood and tail.

Niche 131, Parvati, as a Gauri: This sculpture is accommodated in the wall of the pavilion. The goddess is standing in frontal aspect, her attributes being *varadakshamala*, a *linga* (now destroyed), and Ganesa within lotuses; the fourth arm is broken. She is accompanied by the usual group of four maidens, and nine other goddesses. Her personal adornments including the *jata* are as in some other sculptures of Parvati.

Niche 133, Hari-Hara: The image has four arms but only the blessing gesture and mace are preserved. His head ornament is a combination of Shiva's *jata* on the proper right and Vishnu's crown on the left. His attendant on Shiva's side bears a trident and that on the left a conch.

Niche 134, A three-faced and four-armed Shaivite goddess: We cannot say if the goddess has only three heads or whether we are

to assume that she has a fourth face behind. She is standing frontally, her hair gathered up over her three heads. There are four female attendants, but no animal mount. All the arms are broken, though the natural right hand probably held a lotus whose stalk still remains. Her identity is thus obscured, though her Shaivite affiliation and her ascetic character would seem to be indisputable.

Niches 135-137, Images of Vishnu's twenty-four forms.

Niche 138, Sixteen-or twenty-armed Vishnu riding on Garuda: Most of the hands are lost, but we can still see the natural right hand in the *varada* gesture, another holding a mace, the uppermost wielding a sword, a shield in the uppermost left hand, the discus, and the natural left hand with open palm.

Niches 139-140, Vishnu: The four hands display the *varada*, mudra, mace and discus and but surely a conch was in one of there hands.

Niche 141, Durga Kshemankari: Kshemankari, "She who confers well-being", is the tranquil aspect of Durga, in contrast to the violent Mahishasuramardini. Her attributes are *varadakshamala*, trident, *vajraghanta* (*vajra* with bell). The fourth hand is *broken*. She has a *jata* on her head, and she wears the usual ornaments. Two lions, facing away from each other, are at her feet.

Niche 142, Parvati as Gauri: She carries *varadakshamala*, a *linga*, Ganesha and a pitcher, but her fiery ordeal is not represented here. Two small worshipping figures are being shown where the fire altars are usually placed. Two more figures are seated directly above the *linga* and Ganesha. The usual group of young girls is present, and four of the eight subsidiary niches have standing deities,

of whom the uppermost figure on the one side is Ganesha; therefore we may conjecture that the eroded figure in the subsequent position on the other side was either Shiva or Karttikeya.

Niches 143-148, The next six sculptures at this level are of the Hindu trinity of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva with their consorts, and the three gods of good luck i.e Ganesha, Lakshmi and Kubera . They are on the front side of the pavilion facing the well.

Niche 143, Brahma with his consort: The portly priestly god, four-faced, but with a beard and moustache on only the central face, is seated on a lotus with his consort; his *hamsa* bird is in front. His four hands have a lotus flower, a sacrificial ladle and a book, and with his natural left hand he holds his consort in embrace; a garment is slung across his chest. The couple's hair is arranged in *jata*, with a jewelled diadem at the base. She holds a flower in her hand. Two sages kneel on either side.

Niche 144, Uma-Maheshvara: Shiva is seated with his consort on a high seat under which his bull mount is also depicted. Shiva has four hands in which he holds what looks like a flower, a trident entwined with a cobra, a three-headed cobra, and with the natural left hand he embraces Uma, whose head is damaged. Shiva has a *jata*, but he is richly adorned with precious ornaments. Two persons kneel on either side of the pedestal; only Ganesha can be made out on the frames.

Niche 145, Vishnu and Lakshmi riding on Garuda: Vishnu's right hand is half open, the upper right is broken, and the left hands have a discus and a conch. Lakshmi embraces him with one hand, her other arm is broken.

Niche 146, Ganesha with his consort (Pl.17): Ganesha, perched on a circular seat, has in his four hands his own broken tusk, a battle-axe, a lotus, and with his normal left hand he embraces his consort. A richly decorated stomach band and other ornaments adorn his person. A jewelled cobra crawls over his stomach. Ganesha's consort fondles the god's trunk. Ganesha's mouse helps himself to a sweet ball from the vessel in front of the seat. There is a touch of informality to this carving, as also in the representation of Prithvi in the sculpture of Varaha in Niche 29.

Niche 147, Maha-Lakshmi (?): The goddess is seated on a lotus pedestal. Her two natural hands have a rosary coupled with the *abhaya* gesture and a round object, probably a citron; her extra hands, which are broken, may have held lotuses, to judge from the traces which remain. She wears a crown and other usual ornaments.

Although the attributes in the two extra hands are destroyed, yet it may not be incorrect to identify her as Maha-Lakshmi, since the citron which is intact, is alike an attribute of Lakshmi; moreover, Ganesha and Kubera who flank her are also gods of good luck, and the three thus clearly belong together.

Niche 148, Kubera with his consort: The corpulent god's four hands hold a flower (as in two other images on this terrace), the end of a long money bag and his consort's waist. She holds a flower in her left hand, and embraces Kubera. His elephant mount is under the seat. The eight miniature niches on the frames have representations of Kubera, or what must be described as the personified *Nidhis* (Treasures).

Niche 149, Parvati as a Gauri: The goddess bears in her four hands the *varadakshamala*, a *linga*, Ganesha encircled by lotuses and a pitcher. Her personal adornments and companions are as usual; her hair is gathered up in a *jata*, and the four fires are on the sides.

Niche 152, Shiva: The four-armed god is standing with a frontal view, his hands holding *varadakshamala* and a trident entwined with a snake. His hair was arranged in a *jata*, and he wears a few ornaments.

Niche 153, Vishnu: *Chaturmurti* or Vaikuntha, on GarudaThe central niche on this wall enshrines a twenty-armed. His hands hold the following: the front pair forms a gesture and counts the beads of a rosary. The other recognizable attributes of his right hands are: a lotus, an arrow, a mace and a sword; and in the left hands they are a shield, a discus, a noose, a bow, a citron and a conch. He has three visible faces—of a lion, a man and a boar. He wears a stately crown, and other ornaments. His mount Garuda is half-man and half-bird. The corresponding central niche in the opposite wall also has a twenty-armed Vishnu on Garuda, but his hands are even more damaged.

Niche 158, Narasimha's duel with the demon king Hiranyakashipu: The god had no less than sixteen arms, but only the mace in one right hand, and the conch in one of the left hands, are preserved, while his front pair of hands are tearing open the demon's intestines. The god's head has also been destroyed, but his mane is still largely intact. On one side kneels the demon's son Prahlada, Vishnu's devotee. The red hot iron pillar which Prahlada was to embrace, and from which Narasimha emerged, has also been represented.

Niche 161, A priestly god with his consort: All four hands are mutilated beyond recognition; only, his consort does hold a pitcher in her left hand.

Niche 173, A deity with his consort: The ascetic character of this interesting sculpture is transparent through his matted hair, loin cloth, and the animal skin slung from his shoulder, but his identity is puzzling. He is seated on a high seat with his consort. Supporting a bowl in his right hand, his other right hand is broken; his upper left hand holds a book, and he embraces his consort with the normal left. A solitary female companion tips a pitcher into the cup, which is strongly reminiscent of the Kalki incarnation in Niche 22. His consort clings to him with her right hand. A large conch is at the couple's feet.

Niche 174, Vishnu's Gajendramoksha aspect: Out of the sixteen or twenty arms only the two uppermost, with a sword and a shield, remain. Vishnu rushes on his Garuda mount to the rescue of the elephant, represented here in miniature.

Niche 176, Hari-Hara-Pitamaha-Arka, or a synthesis of Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma and the Sun god, the latter being dominant: The Sun god wears top boots, armour, a crown, and his two companions, Dandi and Pingala, are present. In his principal pair of hands he holds two lotus flowers; there were eight hands in all, but only one more pair, with Shiva's trident and cobra, and one right with a discus, are intact. Brahma's *hamsa* bird mount and Shiva's bull are preserved and, curiously, a prancing horse, the Sun god's mount; perhaps the figure next to Dandi represents Garuda. The arrangement of the side frames is slightly different, for while the nine miniature niches are carved on either side and

the top, here two more smaller niches are accommodated just at the base of the arch, on either side, the total of eleven small niches bearing the figures of the Sun god which, together with the central image, make up the group of twelve Adityas, another evidence of the prominence of Surya's personality in this synthesis.

Niche 177, Uma, as one of the twelve Gauris: The four-armed goddess has the following attributes-*varadakshamala*, lotus, *broken*-pitcher, (which would identify Uma), her fourth attribute is a mirror. Her hair is arranged in a *jata*, conforming to her ascetic character.

Niche 178, Gauri or Parvati: She holds *varadakshamala*-a *linga*(?)-Ganesha(?)-pitcher; the mount and the fires are absent, and the side niches have six standing and two sitting figures.

Niche 179, Shiva-Ardhanarishvara (blend of Shiva and his consort in one body): This sculpture is relatively well-preserved. The deity is standing in a frontal aspect, adorned with the appropriate ornaments. The four hands bear *varadakshamala*, trident, mirror, and a pitcher. The head is adorned with a *jata*. A male and a female attend on Shiva, and two females on Uma.

Niche 180, Vishnu is standing frontally: All four hands are broken. A small figure of Shiva represented above his shoulder level on his left, is preserved. Two figures are worshipping him on either side, one of them bearing a conch, but his other attendants are damaged.

As noted before, the higher terraces, which had remained exposed to the elements, have suffered great damage and their niches have been conserved. We therefore directly proceed to consider the divine images placed around the inner circular wall of the well.

7. Images in the niches of the Well: Provision for sculptures in the draw well was made on all the courses, though the arrangement is not the same as on the corridor's walls. The lowest level has a frieze placed just above the water, with small images including those of the Vasus mentioned earlier. The central niches on three upper courses have Vishnu sleeping on the mythical serpent Shesha, which emphasizes the Vaishnava character of the step-well. Other niches have Vishnu, Shiva or Gauri.

A number of these niches are vacant, the rest have images of Shiva, Vishnu and Gauri or Parvati. They are very similar and therefore are not being described individually. But we can imagine that, had all the niches been occupied, they would have made for a pleasing look.

The three central niches on three levels have nearly identical sculptures of Vishnu sleeping on his serpent couch. Depending on the level of water in the well, one or two of these would be submerged, but at least the one at the highest position would remain above water and visible. On the Chart in Pl. 7, they are Niches 251, 270 and 289.

Niche 251, Vishnu reclining on Shesha (Pl.18): This is the first of the three similar sculptures in the well, and the best preserved. The natural right hand is broken; the extra right supports his head, the mace lies next to it, while the two left hands bear his discus and a conch. The serpent's five hoods shade Vishnu's head. Lakshmi rubs his feet, and from the navel of the god a lotus flower bearing Brahma has emerged. In the background, Vishnu's assistants are battling with demons, and others adore him. Under them are the conch, mace and various other objects.

On the highest levels, the stepped arrangement of the wall comes to an end. The wall has a straight profile with a row of thirty-three sculptures around its circumference, including a central stele placed at the western point housing an image of Vishnu seated in yogic posture. Most of the thirty-two other sculptures equally distributed on either side of Vishnu are of divine couples. All the gods have four arms, their consorts have two. The two right hands of the gods are in most instances broken, the front left hand embraces the consort, and by and large only the rear left hand is intact. The goddesses embrace their consorts with their right hands, and many carry a lotus in the left. In view of the damaged condition of the hands, only the recognizable attributes and features will be listed in the following.

Niches 299 to 332, Thirty-three images: These (see Chart, Pl.7) include the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva), Ganesha, the regents of the directions, and Bhairava, all with their consorts. The marriage of Shiva is also represented in *Niche 320* (perhaps indicating the reunion of Udayamati with her husband in afterlife(?).

Niche 315, Vishnu: This is the central niche with a four-armed Vishnu seated in yogic posture on a lotus resting on a pedestal. Both his natural hands lie in his lap, the rear hands are broken. There are several attendants around Vishnu, but they are extremely weather-worn.

Niche 320, Shiva-Parvati's marriage: Shiva's normal right hand is extended to receive the bride's hand, the rear right is broken, a snake is in the extra left hand, and the normal left is also broken; Parvati's left hand is indistinct. On either side of the couple there

are piles of ritual pots. Some divine companions are in attendance, among which the figure seated in front of an altar must be Brahma, the officiating priest. The composition of the sculpture is different from all others in this monument, but then the narrative subject matter is also different from what is usually represented here.

Niche 348: This central niche on the highest level, in a monument where all other central niches are invariably meant for Vishnu alone, may also represent some aspects of Vishnu, but the sculpture is very weathered.

8. Sculptures on the upright posts: The second major class of sculptures in the step-well comprises the projecting panels, framed by pillars, alternating with the niches on the long walls. Some three hundred such carvings survive, but the total certainly would have approached the same number as the divine images if the monument had come down to us complete. The panels display female figures, standing under formalized creepers; Vishnu or the regents of the directions Ishana, Agni, Kubera or Indra. A majority of the female figures are of *apsaras*, others are serpent maidens (*nagakanya*) and female anchorites of some sinister order (*yogini*, *Bhairavi*); carved on the faces of the upright posts placed at fixed intervals, the row upon row of these female figures definitely remind us of the railings of the Buddhist *stupas* of earlier periods. A great variety of motifs is displayed, ranging from the frankly erotic to the devotional.

The *apsaras*, *nayikas* or female figures are in diverse attitudes (Pls. 19-20): bearing objects of worship such as garlands, lamps, conch shells, bells, fly-whisks; taking a bath, or putting on earrings and anklets; gazing into a mirror; dancing, or playing with

balls; playfully striking mischievous monkeys or mendicants for taking liberties with their persons, and so on—motifs which are equally well known from other monuments, a close parallel being supplied by the sculptures on the pillars of the hall of the temple at Modhera.

Side by side with the benign *apsaras* occur other female figures—anchorites of sinister cults—bearing in their hands skull-cups containing a fish, as well as clubs made from a human bone capped by a skull (*khatvanga*), and wearing ornaments of bones (Pl. 21). Such weird mendicants must have been a common sight in mediaeval Gujarat—in our sculptures a realistic touch is provided by village dogs snapping at these strangely attired women.

Even more striking are what may be described as serpent maidens (*nagakanya*). The eroticism of these young women is not even thinly veiled (Pl. 22); stark naked, with one or sometimes two snakes crawling over their limbs, they also carry cranial cups with a fish, the snakes sipping at the cup. Sometimes three owls are perched on an overhead ledge; sometimes a peacock, the snake's natural enemy, is also present. Neither the maiden nor the snake is threatened in the slightest degree, the snakes slithering up and down the naked young bodies as if caressing them, the maidens in turn striking them only in play. Several elements of the motif, the nude female, the skull-cup with fish; the owls, the peacock and the threatening gesture, as though admonishing the snake, add to the sculptures' enigmatic character. The presence of serpent maidens is not surprising in a step-well, since serpents, like the *apsaras*, were conceived of primarily as dwellers of water.

A particularly beautiful motif is the *Nayika Karpuramanjari*, "Camphor Spray". She is represented as a young maiden bathing, with a *chataka* bird swallowing the droplets thinking them to be pearls (Pl. 23). The front and lateral faces on the corner buttresses of the pavilions and walls have figures of Vishnu, Kubera or Indra, Ishana-Shiva and Agni.

One sculpture of Hanuman, on the north side of the second pavilion, is interesting. Standing in hero's posture, Hanuman has his left foot firmly planted on the ground, while the right leg tramples the back of a demon. Another demon on the ground is doubled up, his sword-bearing hand hanging limp to the floor. Hanuman has been fully deified here. Of his four arms, the natural right rests on his bent right knee, expressive of self-assurance, the extra right arm is raised up to strike a blow to the adversaries, his extra left hand wields an uprooted tree, while his natural left hand makes an interesting variation of the classical threatening gesture, in which the first, second and little fingers are extended straight, and the bent thumb and third finger form a loop warning the fallen enemy.

9. Detached Sculptures: The Ranki Vav must have been buried in sand and was de-silted and completely conserved only after 1987. In the course of the clearance work some sculptures were recovered, among them there is a rare sculpture of sage Agastya. Although eroded, the identification with the venerable seer Agastya, who according to myth was "born from a pitcher", cannot be faulted. The portly sage is seated on a large decorated pitcher, his saintly nature revealed by the high matted hair, the long beard, the loin cloth and the loosely draped scarf. The sage has four arms; hence he has here been represented as a deified person. His natural

right arm is bent at the elbow, but the hand is broken, though some traces of the attribute in his hand still remain on the chest; the two rear hands hold long-stalked lotuses; the natural left hand is also broken. Two miniature elephants are anointing him from either side, and two small worshippers are eagerly looking up from the base.

Clearly, it is this unique seat, and the priestly character, that hold the key to the identity of the personage. According to a well known myth in the *Mahabharata*, the twin gods Mitra and Varuna both embraced the *apsara* Urvashi, and their semen was collected in a pitcher, from which was born Agastya—hence his epithet *kumbhayoni*, "He who was born from a pitcher", or whose womb was a pitcher.

10. Queen Udayamati : This sculpture, about 48 cm in height, is an idealised portrait of Udayamati, queen of the Chaulukya Bhimadeva I of Gujarat, patroness of the Ranki Vav step-well. Udayamati is seated on a cushion. She bears a lotus flower in her right hand, the left hand is resting in her lap, and holds an indistinct curved object, such as a book, or a slab for sandalwood paste. As many as five adorers attend on her, which testifies to her exalted status. An inscription on the face of the seat reads "*Maharajni Shri Udayamati*"(Pl.24).

4. DATE, AUTHORSHIP AND STYLE

THE LOCAL NAME OF THE STEP WELL, RANI-KI-VAV, means"the Queen's step-well", and "Queen" denotes Udayamati, consort of Bhimadeva I (1022-1064 A.D.). The association of the name of Udayamati with the Rani-ki-Vav step well has persisted through the centuries; it was not forgotten even during the long period when the monument itself was buried and remained non-functional, and is still current. The tradition associating Udayamati with the Rani-ki-Vav was current as early as the thirteenth century, when some devout persons had an inscribed portrait of Udayamati carved in marble and installed it in one of the vacant niches in the well shaft.

If the architecture and sculptures of the Rani-ki-Vav squarely places it in the late eleventh century, the testimony of a mediaeval historian of Gujarat corroborates the conclusion; the Jaina pontiff Merutunga, who composed the *Prabandhachintamani*, a chronicle of the kings of Gujarat, in 1304 A.D., recorded that Bhimadeva's queen Udayamati caused to be built in the capital (*shripattana*), that is Anahillapataka, a new step-well which surpassed even the Sahasralinga reservoir. It does not need much arguments to persuade us that the step-well built by queen Udayamati must be the same as our Rani-ki-Vav.

5. RANKI VAV AS A COMMEMORATIVE MONUMENT

TO SAY THAT UDAYAMATI WAS THE PATRONESS of the step-well, and that the style of the step-well places it in the last decades of the eleventh century, is tantamount to saying that the queen built it after the death of Bhimadeva in 1064—intending it to be a monument of piety.

Temples and other charitable edifices in India were built in fulfilment of some observance, to accumulate merit (*punya*) for oneself or others. The practice of digging wells in memory of dead relatives was widely prevalent in ancient times.

Udayamati constructed the step-well as a memorial, following a practice sanctioned by tradition.

In this commemorative step-well the images of Parvati's penance, the goddess separated by death from her consort and practising austerities to win reunion with him, were deliberately portrayed to express Udayamati's own tragic widowed condition, and her own yearning to be reunited with her departed husband. Just as the goddess in mythical time performed penance to win back the hand of Shiva, so Udayamati too, in order to be reunited with her deceased husband, constructed the step-well, in conformity with the changed times.

GLOSSARY

Abhaya	gesture indicative of protection or "no-fear"
Akshamala	rosary of *rudraksha beads*
Apsara	a nymph, celestial young woman
Asana	posture of sitting
Bhairavi	female mendicant of a "left-handed" order
Brahmacharin	celibate student
Chaturvimshatimurtis	Vishnu's twenty-four forms
Dikpalas	eight regents of the directions
Dvadashagauri	twelve forms of Shiva's consort
Jata	matted hair
Karpuramanjari	name of a young woman, a motif
Khatvanga	occult implement, skull mounted on a bone
Kunda	watertank, reservoir
Makara	crocodile, hybrid animal
Nagakanya	serpent maiden
Shrivatsa	special mark on Vishnu's chest
Tarjanihasta	threatening gesture of the hand
Torana	free standing entrance gate
Varada	gesture of blessing
Varadakshamudra	combination of *varada* and rosary
Yogini	female mendicant of a secret order

FURTHER READING

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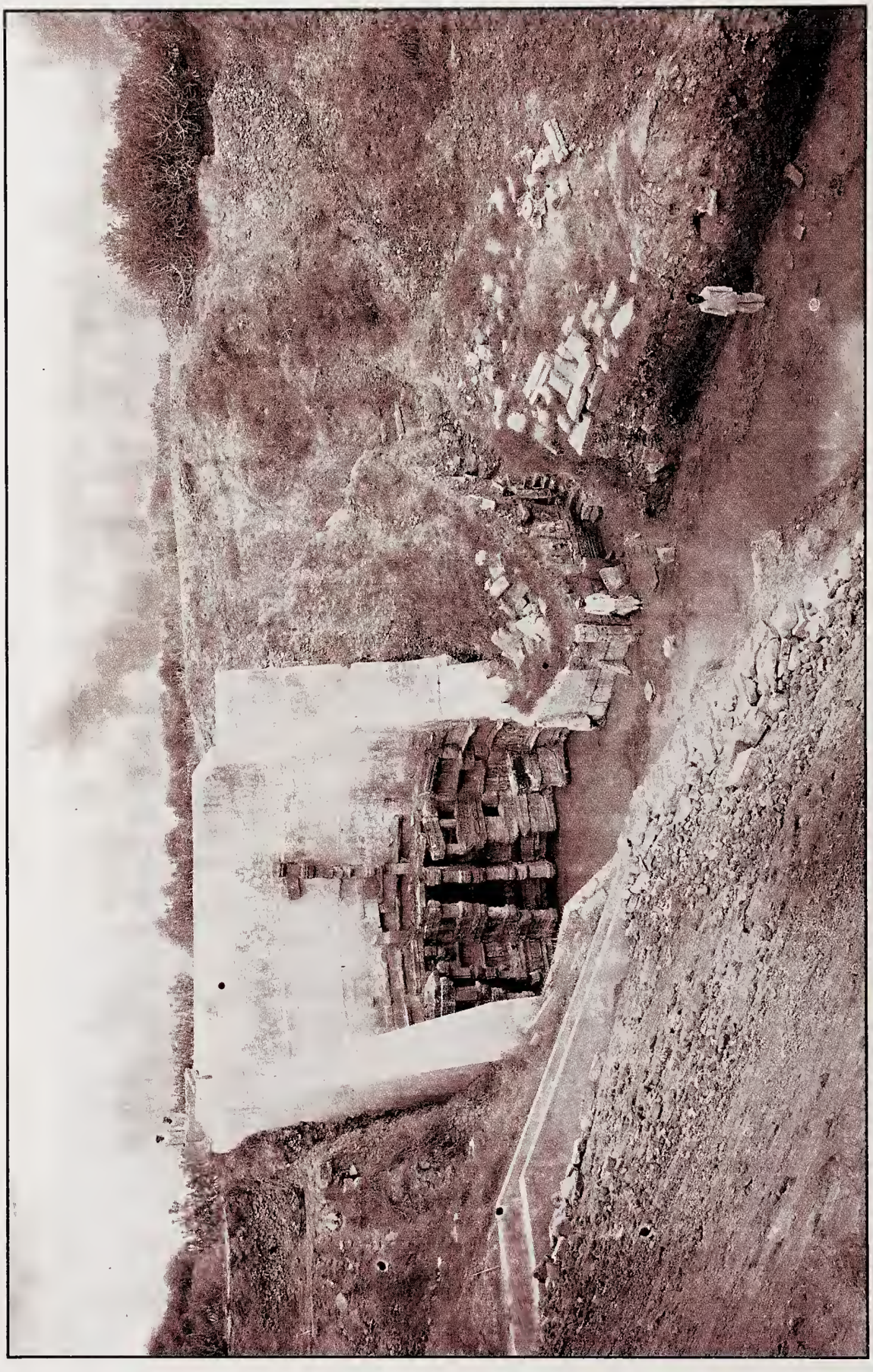
PLATES

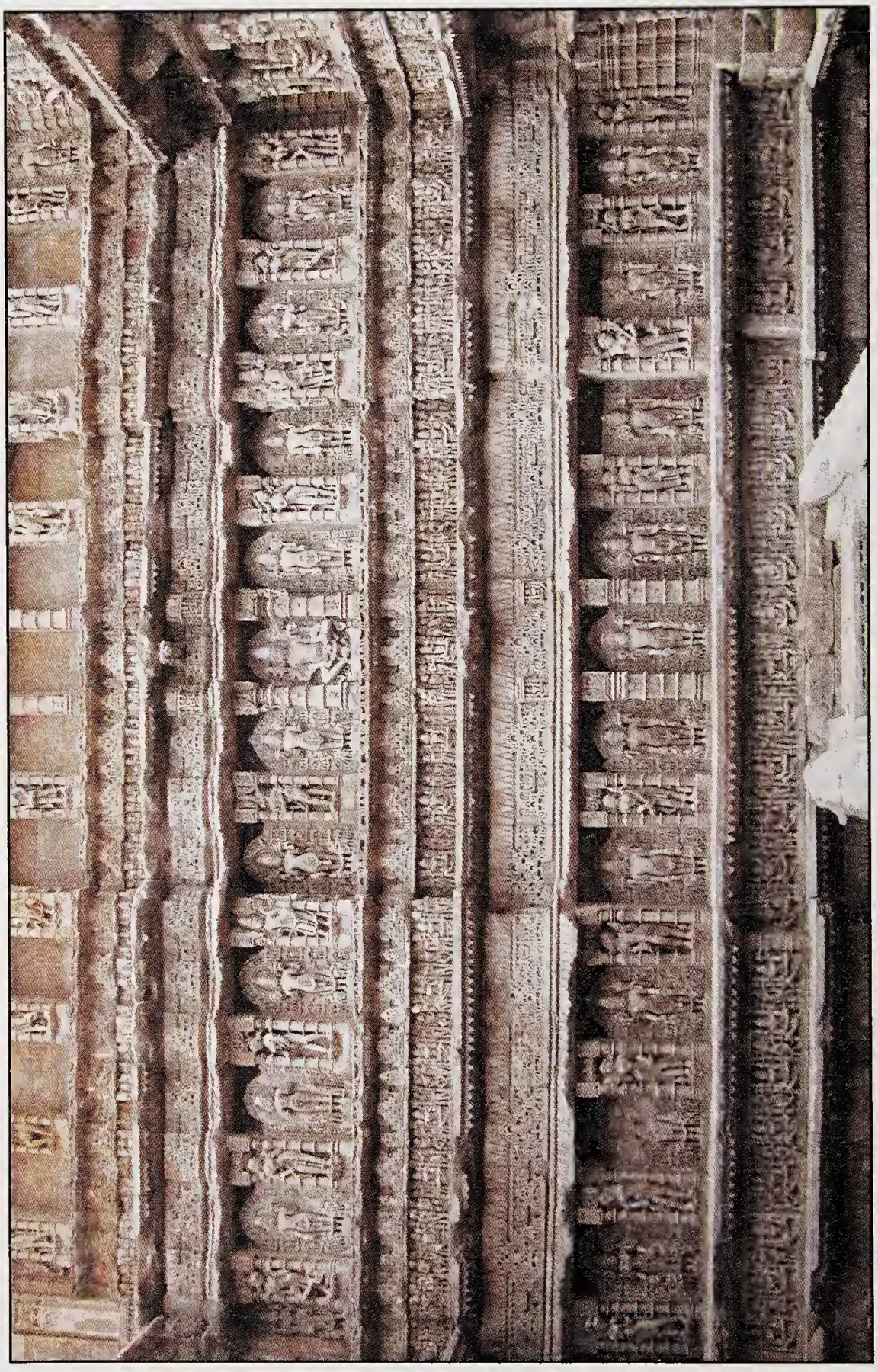
RANI-KI-VAV, PATAN

Pl. 1. General view. See p.3

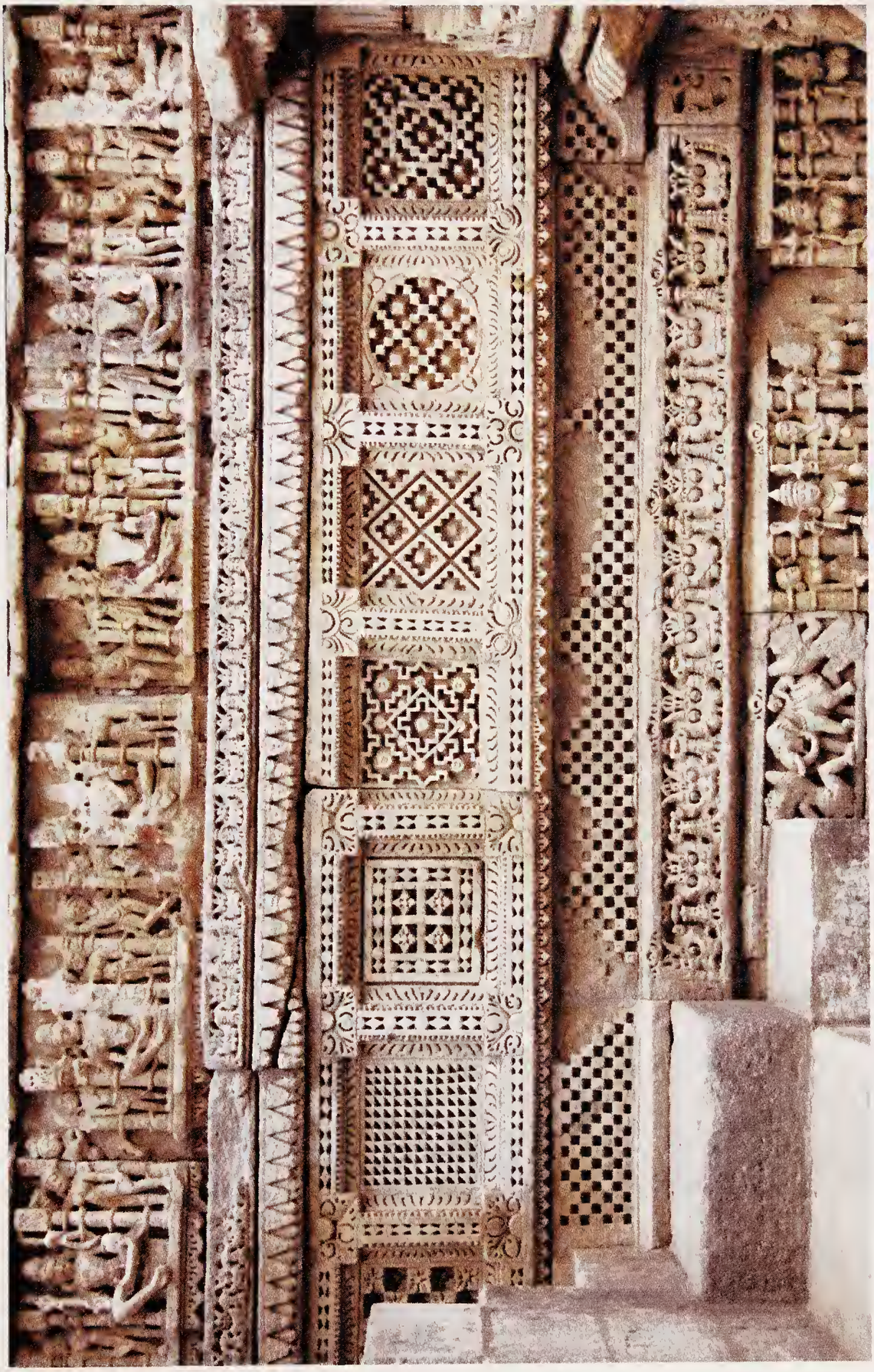


Pl. 2. Before conservation. See p.4

Pl. 3. Closer view of the step-well. See p.5

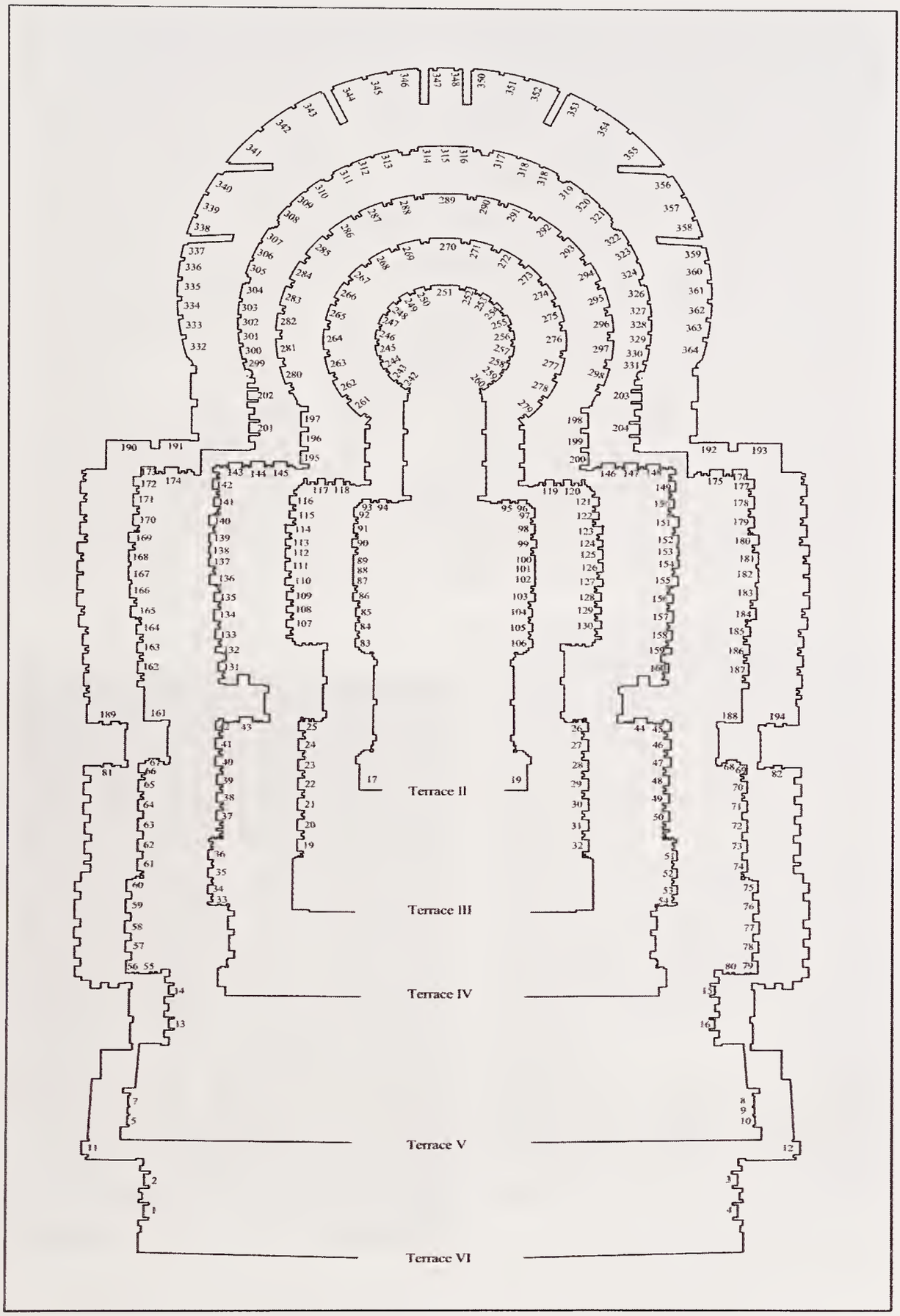


Pl. 4. Side wall of the reservoir of kunda. See p.5



Pl. 5. Geometrical and decorative patterns on the wall. *See p.7*

Pl. 6. View from the bottom of the well. See p.8

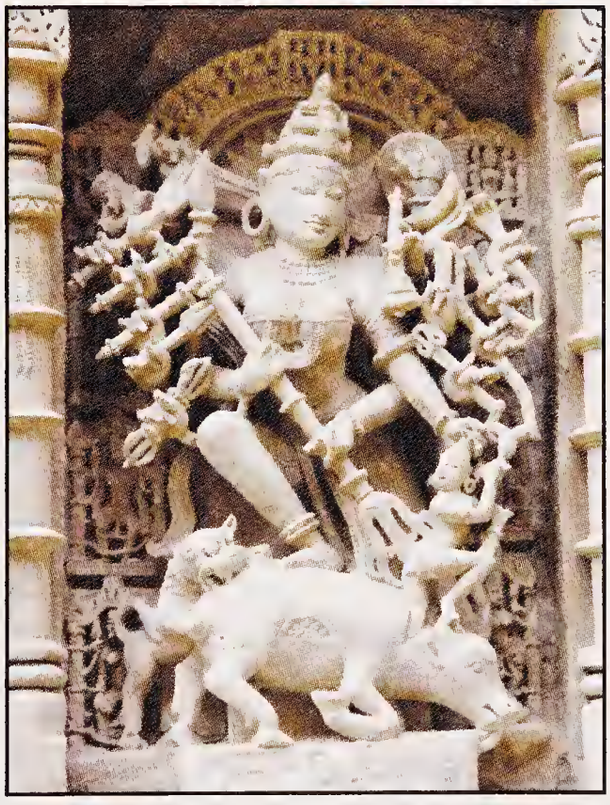


Pl.7. Chart showing the positions of the sculptures.
See pp.14 -15 & 28

Pl. 8. Balarama. See p.15

Pl. 9. Buddha. See p.16

Pl. 10. Kalki. See p.16

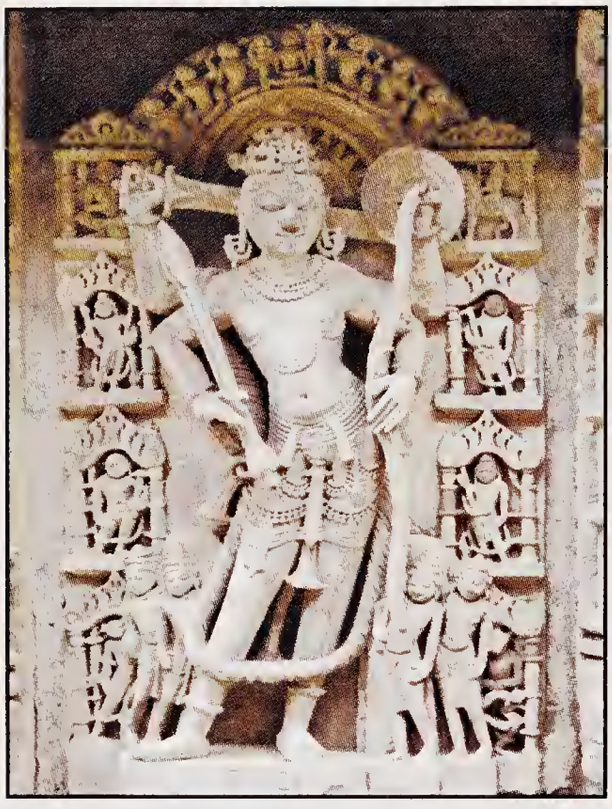


Pl. 11. Mahishasuramardini. See p.17

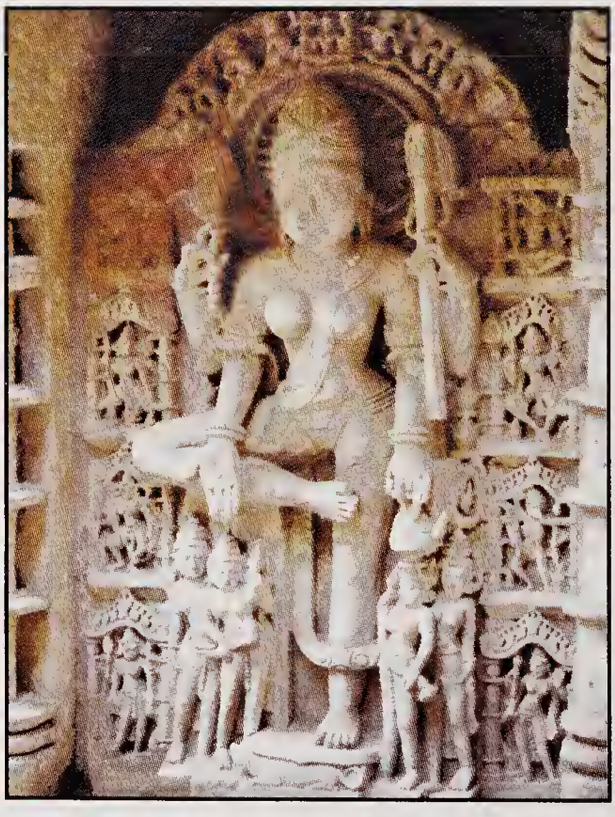
Pl. 12. Bhairava. See p.17

Pl. 13. Varaha. See p.17

Pl. 14. Vamana. See p.18



Pl. 15. Rama. See p.18



Pl. 16. Parvati performing penance. See p.20

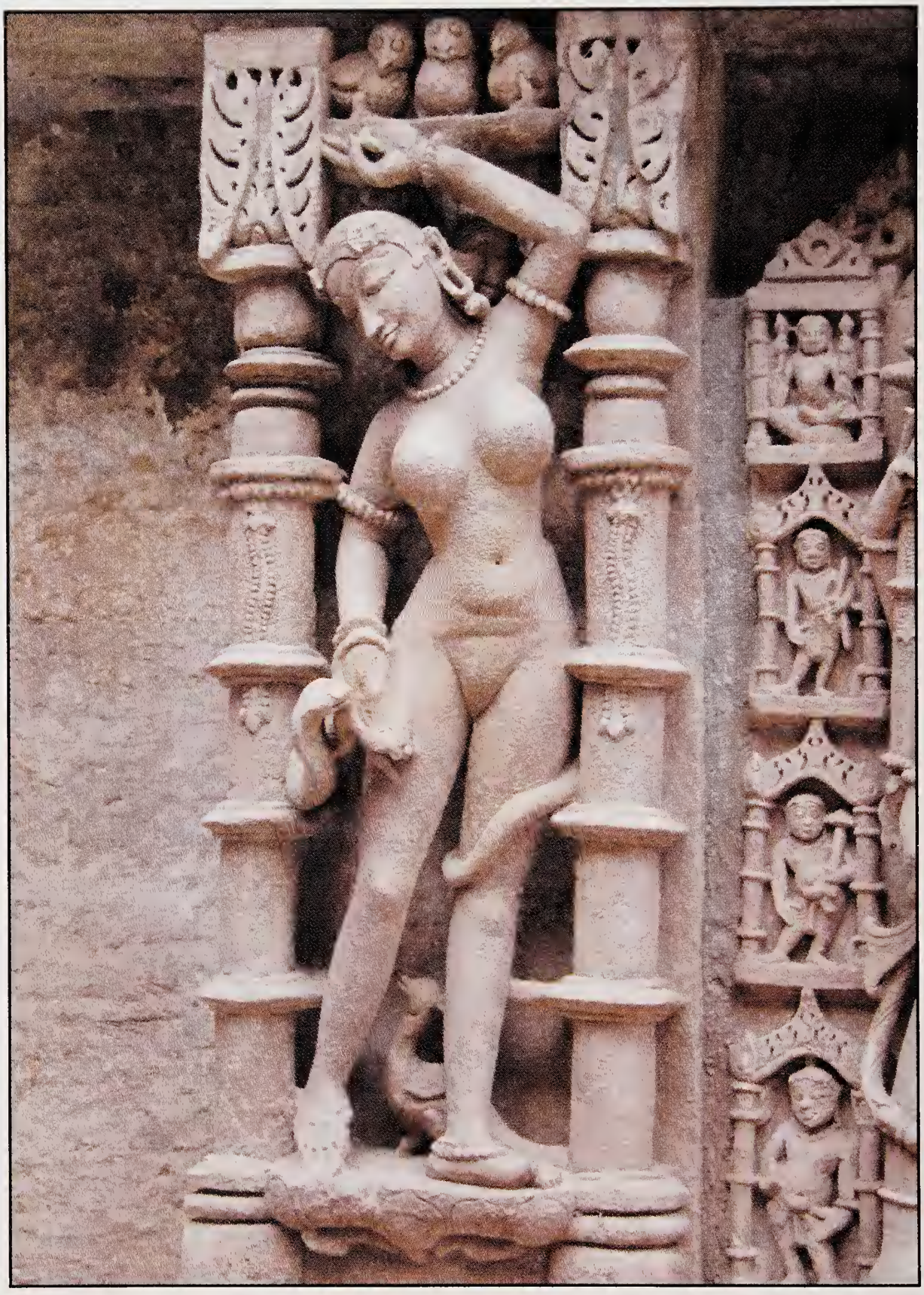
Pl. 17. Ganesha with his consort. See p.23

Pl. 18. Vishnu sleeping on Shesha. See p.27

Pl. 19. Female figure. See p.29

Pl. 20. Female figure.
See p.29

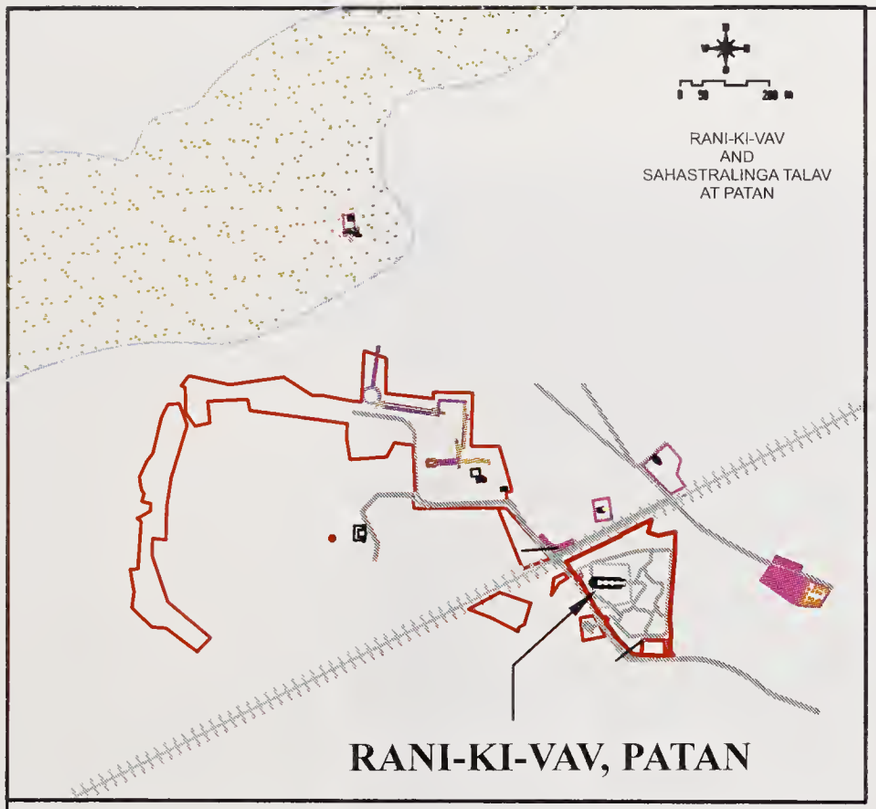
Pl. 21. Female mendicant.
See p.30



Pl. 22. Nagakanya. See p.30

Pl. 23. Nayika Karpuramanjari. See p. 31 p.31

Pl. 24. Portrait of Queen Udayamati. See p.32



RANI-KI-VAV, PATAN

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ABANDONED RAIL ROUTE

CHAIN LINK FENCING

TUBE WELL

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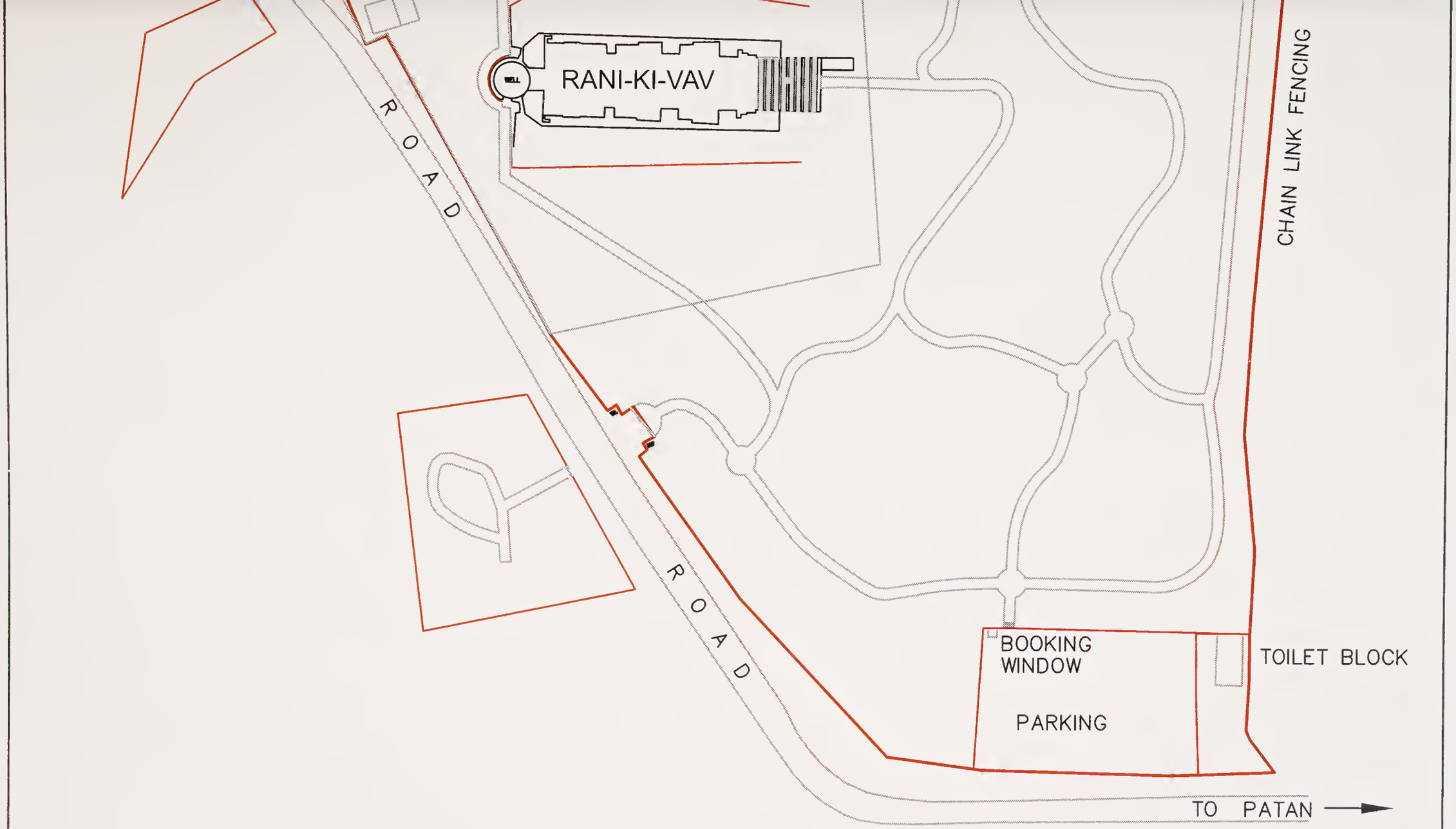
PATH–WAY

TO SAHASTRALING


RANI-KI-VAV
ROAD
ROAD
CHAIN LINK FENCING
BOOKING
WINDOW
PARKING
TOILET BLOCK
TO PATAN

SITE PLAN

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